

[The] Overcoming Outrage!

By Ralph Blair

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Have you noticed any rampant outrage these days? Lots of people are “*outraged*.” That’s what they *claim*. They’re “*OUTRAGED!*”—in big, bold italic caps and punctuated by exclamation points with none of the expletives deleted. Are they merely *vocabulary-challenged*?

And folks try to enlist others in their outrage, hoping that a chorus of outrage outdoes outrage on one’s own.

But is it all a bit *overdone*? Is it prompting only exasperated eyeball-rolls of, “Puh-leeze!” and angry shout-backs of, “Well, *we’re* outraged at *your* outrage! So there!”

Some outrage *is* sheathed in some seeming civility, but it’s still a seething resentment and passive aggression.

Outrage is over-the-top anger. When, as it *feels*, we’re *attacked* by *unwanted* emotions—say, fear, hurt, frustration, irritation—we try to get on top of the feelings by *venting outrage* as “righteous” indignation.

Outrage can be *spontaneous*—as in losing our temper. But lots of outrage is strictly for *show*—as in temper-*tantrums*.

And have you noticed that most of *us* are what so many are outraged at, i.e., LGBTs and Christians? And if we’re *both*, we get outrage from *both*. When we get outrage *from* them, do we get outraged *at* them? If so, do we get *more* outraged at the Christians or at the LGBTs?

Do we get outraged at *ourselves*? Google’s count is 17 million results for “outrage” but only 117 for “outrage at ourselves”—an unfortunate ratio. It can be *useful* to be outraged at *ourselves* since we can get our hands on it and maybe do something about it. We *can’t* get our hands on *other’s* outrage, though we might be tempted to get our hands around their *necks*. But that should remind us of our own outrageousness and turn us from griping to getting a grip. And, getting rid of *our* outrage might preempt outrage *against* us. But waiting for others to get over *themselves* is frustrating, even futile. Getting over *ourselves* instead of having to wait around for *them* to get over *themselves* is efficient.

And whether we’re outraged at *others*, or others are outraged at *us*, or we’re outraged at *ourselves*, a sober perspective can help.

The Times of London once asked some British brains to write about “What’s Wrong with the World.” G. K. Chesterton replied in just one sentence: “*I’m* what’s wrong with the world.” *That’s* perceptive self-awareness! He knew himself well enough to know what Solzhenitsyn would, years later: “The battle-line between good and evil runs through the heart of everyone.” It would be wise to cut the crap and admit that each of us, in his or her own little corner of the world, is a microcosm of what’s wrong with the whole world. So, says Darrell Bock: “The way to start fixing what is wrong in the world is to start with fixing ourselves.”

But that's a tall order for most folks. In Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood*, Hazel Motes, in the cheap, new suit and hat he's bought on his return from the war, protests being mistaken for a preacher. In the cab to the whorehouse, he says: "I ain't no preacher!" The cabbie replies: "Now, I understand. It ain't anybody perfect on this green earth of God's, preachers nor nobody else. And you can tell people better how terrible sin is if you know from your own personal experience."

Well, you can't merely better *tell* people how terrible sin is if you know from your *own* personal experience how terrible *your* own sin is, you can better *figure out* who *they* are and better *empathize* with them, if you know from your *own* experience how terrible your *own* sin is. But we try to *deny* our own sin, and so we continue to miss what's going on.

In his Inaugural Address, President Obama spoke of *our* fault, of *our* "collective failure to make hard choices." He said: "We come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn-out dogmas that for too long have strangled our politics." He added: "In the words of Scripture, the time has come to set aside childish things." This was a noble call to national repentance.

But, as *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow noted: "It took just two weeks for Washington's Kumbaya experiment in bipartisan civility to explode in turgid rants, finger-pointing and re-entrenchment."

Why? There had been such *hope* for *change*. Well, the "battle-line between good and evil" *really does* run right "through the heart of *everyone*." *Each* of us *is*, indeed, "what's wrong with the world"—each and every one of us, black, white, rich, poor, male, female, straight, gay, Christian or not.

Since *this* is true, when *we* mess up, "Mistakes may have been made—hey, nobody's perfect." When *they* mess up, it's an *outrage* and we forget all about that self-serving little manta, "Nobody's perfect." So lobbyists left and right lie and distort. See, lobbyists are lap dancers. They're *paid* to turn their *customers* on. But turning their customers on, ticks off all who can't stand their customers. Then *they* turn on *them*. Net result: more outrage!

Do you know that when social psychologists test whether people live up to their claims of ethical superiority, they find a *self-inflating bias*? No! It's true. People say *they* behave better than *others* do. Yet, studies find that those who speak so positively of their own uprightness behave just as badly as those whom they disparage. *All* fail to live up to how nice and good they *claim* to be. Shocked? Not if you know *yourself*.

So, Democrats and Republicans blame *each other*. Christians and secularists blame *each other*. Capital and labor blame *each other*. Whites and people of color blame *each other*. Sunnis and Shiites blame *each other*. Israelis and Palestinians blame *each other*. In Ira Blumenthal's phrase:

It's "*Ready, blame, fire*"—all around the world—just so long as it's *the other*, not *us*, who gets "blamed."

But blame games don't work. They *can't*. Blame games are *con* games and the blamer *knows* the con, no matter what he *claims*. Wallowing in the outrage of blame games, there's nothing to spew but the outrage that then spawns more outrage from the targets of outrage.

Well, can we get ourselves *out* of our outrage? We can—but only if we really want to get out. Even then, we can do so only up to a point.

Most don't want to get out of their outrage. They demand a *right* to their outrage as "self-help." Yet even their demand is blinded by outrage. If they grasped the *unintended consequences* of their outrage—all the self-deceptive and self-sabotaging effects such as psychological and physical stress and unintended economic, interpersonal and antisocial sequelae—they'd plead for escape *from* their outrage.

But people keep trying to escape from a sense of being trapped. They fear they're stifled and oppressed by others and by circumstances. Often they *do* have a case. But they try to get out from under such entrapment by *raging* against whatever and whomever they might blame. But their very raging reinforces their rage. And the more they rage against others, the more the others rage back against them. So they all wind up with yet more to be outraged about.

Besides, a *victim mentality* is, itself, a trap. It deprives self-styled victims of what power they might have. They *victimize themselves*—however *others* may be victimizing them. Being *hooked* on such a *victim mentality* is self-obsessed sophistry spun as a solution. Seeing themselves as *victims* of bullies, victims *bully back*. But now *they're* the bullies who get bullied back in the backlash of the bullies they bully. And it all ends in a bunch of *bull!*

So, what *is* bullying? It's a defensive attempt to *cover up* one's *own* sense of not *measuring* up. But the cover-up covers up *nothing*, for the bully's sense of inferiority remains front row center in the bully's brain.

Now, of course, nobody else is *inside* the bully's brain where the sense of inferiority lies in wait. But the bully's so preoccupied with the brain's melodrama that the bully doesn't "get" that. So the bully, still fearing something's observably *wrong* with self, tries to divert the others' attention from what nobody else sees anyway. The bully also tries to *redirect* the others' attention to what the bully hopes will be seen as something wrong in the bullied. If the bullied believes what the bully says, the bullying will "work." If the bullied doesn't, it won't.

But even if we *want* to get *ourselves* out of our outrage, we ourselves can do so only up to a point. As Christians, we must know that, to get out from under *all* the outrage, we must turn to Outside help—from the Creator of a world he called good and Redeemer of a world gone bad.

From a Christian worldview, we see something deeper going on in all this outrage—something *primitive* that spills out through the cosmos and into the very heart of God. The *expressed* outrage is but a *symptom*—and a *superficial* symptom—of an ancient *back-story* of an outrage. It's *derivative, secondary* to what's *really* wrong with us. And both the bullies and the bullied who buy into the bullying are but scratching at the surface of what's *really* bugging them. Yet, without Outside help, they'll keep scratching each other's eyes out in a much *deeper* defiance.

In all the attacks on each other, we keep dancing around the *deepest* issue. In some very deep-seated memory, each one senses that he or she is as guilty as “the other.” *We're* as insecure in *our* nakedness as were Adam and Eve, dressed in their fashion-plate fig leaves, trying to hide from God in the Garden. And when confronting each other and when confronted by the truth that we know deep down to be true, we're every bit the blamers that our ancient parents were.

Well, I've said we can get *ourselves* out of the *superficial* outrage that's *secondary* and *derivative* of the *deep outrageousness of our outrage that only God can overcome*. So let's look first at how we can rescue ourselves from our *superficial* outrage and follow up with how we can *be* rescued from our deepest outrage. To do the first we must use our God-given intelligence to identify, challenge and change the irrational self-talk that fuels outrage. As the ancient Stoics knew, it's not the *circumstance*, but our *interpretation* of it, that determines our feelings and experience.

To deal with *deepest* outrage, we must turn to God, himself.

One way to get out of *superficial* or *secondary* outrage is to refuse to *freeze-frame* the moment, learning to take the *long* view, not the *shortsighted* view. The *long* view rejects shortcuts that short-circuit into burnout. Quick fixes may be quick, but they seldom fix anything. They tend to end in despair and cynicism. *Long* views are patient because they're informed by *perspective* (as in a good sense of humor) and a good sense of *history*.

Justice David Souter recently told the American Academy of Arts and Science that a good sense of “history produces an antidote to cynicism.” But, these days, a good sense of *history* is in short supply. So, it's no wonder that what's *not* in short supply is cynicism.

Here's a true story that takes the *long* view.

In 1964, as InterVarsity's staffer at the University of Pennsylvania, I was invited to speak on “situation ethics” to Christian students at Yale. I told them that, contrary to what most people think, the Bible does not condemn a committed homosexual relationship. I also said that Christians should live the Golden Rule in dealing with homosexuals.

A few of the students liked my talk, but it did *not* fly with administrators back at IVCF headquarters. They decided that I would *not* be reappointed for the *next* school year. So, finishing my work at Penn that spring, I moved on up to Penn State to be the interim American Baptist chaplain.

As one door closed, another opened.

I was hired for the year to fill in for a chaplain on sabbatical. As Mainline Baptists were more lax than IVCF administrators, I figured I'd be freer to be more innovative at Penn State than I'd been at Penn. Besides, what could they *do*—not reappoint me for *next* year?

So I set up a series of discussion panels on six hot topics: drugs, anti-Semitism, abortion, euthanasia, The Playboy Philosophy and "The Homosexual Revolution." I called the series "Open Panels On Problems" - "Op-Op", for short. Publicity was patterned on the era's craze in Op art. Op-Op was modeled on David Susskind's old TV show, complete with a carafe of coffee on a coffee table around which I placed professors and other panelists. Each night, I gave the opening remarks and moderated. You would not be wrong to suspect that the other five topics were something like foils for the night of "The Homosexual Revolution."

The morning the "Op-Op" posters went up along College Avenue, the outraged VP for Student Affairs, (psychologist Robert G. Bemreuter) rushed into his office demanding to know; "What the hell is 'oop-oop'!? Who the hell is Ralph Blair!?" A friendly dean told me of the mispronunciation.

After the SRO panel on homosexuality, that included my friend Clark Polak of Philadelphia's homophile movement, the Penn State *Daily Collegian's* front-page headline was: "Homosexual Topics Attract Mob."

Op-Op nights were followed by Greek house and dorm discussions –a "take-out" service called "Op-Op A Go-Go," a nod to another craze of that era. In these small discussion groups on homosexuality, I told the students that, even if they thought they didn't have a stake in the topic right then and there, there might come a day when they'd need to deal with it in a son or daughter or grandchild. Those kids in the mid-60s are now in *their* mid-60s and I'm sure that some of them *did* have to deal with a gay son or daughter. And by now, some are dealing with LGBT issues in their grandchildren.

At the end of that school year, my job in campus ministry at Penn State was over. Another door closed. But another door opened. I stayed on at the university and got my doctorate, doing my dissertation on—what else?—homosexuality!

A lot has changed since then. Stonewall came along five years later and EC in another five years. And today, gay life at Yale isn't what it was when I spoke there 45 years ago.

In 1986 Yale's Lesbian and Gay Studies Center was established for students who were not yet born in 1964. In the mid-90s, Yale's Pink Book was started. In 1998, Yale set up an undergraduate concentration in Queer Studies. Larry Kramer's Initiative was unveiled in 2001, as was the LGBT Co-op, a university-subsidized group "to provide safe spaces" for LGBTs. It organizes annual Pride and sponsors pro-queer lectures. In 2006, the term "gender identity or expression" was added to Yale's nondiscrimination policy. And just this year, Yale launched the Office of LGBTQ Resources to make Yale "feel like a friendly place as opposed to an alien, hostile place" for LGBT and queer students.

Now you'd think that, with all this kid-glove care, LGBT Yalies would have no grievance. But, you'd be wrong. These kids were reared on "I Am Special" coloring books and grade inflation entitlements. So, at the opening ceremonies for the new Office of LGBTQ Resources, an LGBT Co-op coordinator complained in outrage: "The fact that we don't actually have a physical space says lots about Yale's stance towards LGBT life on the ground at a metaphorical level." "...Yale's stance towards LGBT life on the ground at a metaphorical level ..."? She's locked into some post-modernist claptrap and parsing it is happily above my pay grade. But if she's looking for "physical space ... at a metaphorical level"—hey, *Yale's entire campus is an emptied closet!*

She might soften her outrage with a bit of historical perspective. By 1987, back before *she* was born, Yale was dubbed the "gay Ivy." But back in the mid-50s, before *her parents* were born, what was gay life at Yale like "on the ground" (and I'm not talking "metaphorical level")? It was so bad that Larry Kramer considered suicide, thinking he was the only homosexual at Yale.

And, back in '64, when IVCF executives wouldn't reappoint an IVCF staffer for saying a good gay word at Yale, there was a 15-year-old high school student out in the state of Washington—two years away from turning to Christ during fraternity rush—who'd go on to become the *national president* of IVCF and give his own good gay word at Yale. Now he's an Old Testament scholar, a professor of evangelism and a good friend of EC.

It's clear once again that it's not reasonable to *freeze-frame* shortsightedness when historical perspective shows that, over the long haul and at an increasing rate, social justice and individual liberty is the direction of Western Civilization—largely due to the Judeo-Christian heritage.

However, speaking as a Christian, we also must have a sober view of the *limitations of human* progress as such. Christian theologians from Augustine through Niebuhr and others have noted that we live *between* the City of God and the City of Man. As Michael Cromartie says he used to tell his friends: "You act as if Ronald Reagan will bring in the kingdom of God. He will not." He'd explain: "We are to bring approximate justice to basically insoluble problems. ... Because the world is fallen, because it is decayed and we live in a sinful world, we will never bring in any kind of utopia." He adds: "That's a warning for people on the right and the left."

Yet we need never finally fear *any* future, though, of course, the future's all anyone fears. God sees both the cross *and* the crown. Trusting God, we can catch a glimpse of the future through

Eternal Eyes and foresee a future City Foursquare coming from heaven himself. (Revelation 21:16)

We also get ourselves into *superficial* or *secondary* outrage by irrationally thinking that things in the *past* needed to *have been otherwise*, things *now* need to *be otherwise* and some things in the *future* need to be *otherwise* while other things must *never* be *otherwise*. Buying into these fantasies of roads *not* taken or roads *yet* to be taken, we try to assure ourselves of *safety*. But faith in fantasies is folly—even *dangerous*. Holding ourselves hostage to our fallacious but oh-so-*lovely* “if only” scenarios and our fallacious but oh-so-scary “what if” scenarios, we’ll regret, resent, or distress ourselves into outrage.

Of course, we can’t find any fault *in* the oh-so-*lovely* fantasies because we’ve not *put* any fault *into* them. And we can’t find anything *but* scary stuff in the scary fantasies because we haven’t *put* anything but scary stuff *into* them. But whether they’re fantasies of desire or dread, they’re mere daydreams or nightmares. They’re simply not to be believed.

We forget that others play *their* parts in *real* life. They don’t bother to read the lines *we*’ve written for them. They don’t bother to follow *our* stage directions. So, our oh-so-*lovely otherwise* scenarios never get lived out. But we’re still stuck with *our* buying into them. So, when our *make-believe* world doesn’t work out, we get into *real* world temper tantrums. But it won’t help. Besides, others get ticked-off by our temper tantrums. Then *they* get into a temper tantrum against *us*. That’s not what we wanted, is it? The oh-so-scary fantasies suffer the fault of all fantasies. We can no more predict the experience of the *dreaded* fantasy than we can predict the experience of the *desired* fantasy. Realizing this, we can stop “needing” it to go the way it *wouldn’t have gone* and *won’t* go, anyway. We then get ourselves off the painful hooks of frustration and fear and outrage that come with trying to *make* a fantasy come true or *make* another fantasy *not* come true. *No fantasy comes true. It can’t!* Fantasies are simply too simplistic; reality is complex.

Can’t we learn this from our *disappointments* in things we *did* run after? Can’t we learn this from our *pleasant surprises* in what we *didn’t* run after—maybe even ran *from*? So why get ourselves all bent out of shape in outrage over silly notions of how we think we need everything to go? We don’t *know* enough to “need” things to go *our* way.

Speaking as a Christian, where did this bright idea that things need to be otherwise come from? I seem to recall three stooges: a B.S.-slinging snake and a couple yet too gullibly green and green with envy, to foresee for themselves the results of *self-sovereignty*. To them, a gut job of paradise seemed like a good idea at the time. They were dead wrong.

But the otherwise scenario we *can* count on is *God’s* Otherwise Scenario—the Blessed Hope we have in Christ and in his making right, at last, all that’s gone wrong.

In the meantime, a line in Stuart Hamblen's song, "Known Only to Him," is apropos: "I know not *what* the future holds, but I know *Who* holds the future." *That* certainty is more than enough.

A world bound in sin is *bound* to be a *mixed* bag. But folks don't seem to expect this. So they get outraged when—surprise, surprise—experience in this world is *mixed*. But, instead of conjuring up an unmixed world out of the thin air between their ears, they'd do well to realize that *this* is *now* a world of sickness *and* health, pain *and* pleasure, boom *and* bust, where, as in Blake's words, "joy and woe are woven fine."

But after maturing into the practical awareness of a *mixed*-bag world, might there not be, in all our childlike restlessness and our awkward longing, an intimation—not of some silly Land of Oz, but of a sacred Land of *Awes*—a land beyond all that *this* world can offer. What if, as C. S. Lewis sensed, the very *desire* for an *unmixed* world is a primal *memory* and *reminder* of *deepest* dreams that will one day come true in the New Heavens and New Earth of a promise we've been given!

We get into superficial or secondary outrage by personalizing.

Washington Post columnist Dana Milbank calls himself "left-leaning" but wonders: "Why is the left still so angry ... even under Obama, the anger on the left is, if anything, more personal and vitriolic than on the right." Right-wing journalist Marvin Olasky responds: There's "plenty of anger on the right," too. Both left and right face the tit-for-tat rage of each other and *personalize* it. Then the caricature *from* the other side is used to *rationalize* caricature *of* the other side. And all that hurt, fear and frustration of being misunderstood or misrepresented then spills out into even more outrage.

When I caution new clients not to *personalize* what others say or do, they're puzzled—even a bit *outraged*. They think that, if something's said *against* them or something's done *against* them, it *must* be *about* them. So, they insist on being outraged.

But what someone says is the story of the speaker, not the story of the spoken to or about. If, for example, you're uncomfortable being gay or evangelical, you'll get defensive if you're ridiculed for being gay or evangelical. If you're *fine* with your identity, you won't get defensive. So you won't get yourself in an outrage.

For example, you'd probably *not* buy into ridicule about your wearing something, say, blue. You wouldn't personalize that even if it wound up as the most rabid ridicule in a front-page headline in *The New York Times* and was picked up by CNN and Fox News. You'd probably bask bemusedly in your 15 minutes of fame.

But *buying into* ridicule while believing it *mustn't* be so, puts you into defensive outrage. Realizing that all evaluations are the stories of the evaluators, not the stories of the evaluated,

you'll consider the source and move on without outraging yourself over what you don't buy into. Even if *you* buy into "it," as it were, it's still *your own* version you're buying into.

Even *circumstances* get personalized. With all the jails and hospitals, unemployment offices and cemeteries—people still so easily whine in outrage, "Why *me?!?*" Why *not* me? Are jails for those who rob only others, pink slips for only everyone else, and hospitals and cemeteries for all but *us?*

Speaking as a Christian, granting that others' criticism of us is, indeed, *their* story, it might be useful nonetheless to listen and learn, lest we overlook something of which we should repent and recommit ourselves to do better.

But, when all is said and done, if evaluation *is* the *evaluator's* story and *not* the story of the evaluated, we'd do well to trust *God's* evaluation. *His* judgment is *his* story, and it's always and forever coming from the very heart of wisdom, as unfathomably merciful as was his bearing our sins on the cross. It goes deeper than our enemies' outrage, deeper than our friends' friendship, and deeper even than we can go in knowing and caring for ourselves.

We get into *superficial* or *secondary* outrage by *awfulizing* what are, after all, the everyday challenges of life in *this* world. Refraining from doing so should not be hard. Awfulizing, by definition, is *exaggeration* and exaggeration is *distortion* of reality. Being out of touch with reality *is* trouble. So, no wonder we *sense* trouble when awfulizing.

Speaking as a Christian, this fallen world is, itself, a *distortion* of a long lost reality that will one day be restored. So why further *distort* this *distorted* world? Let's not awfulize what's on its way out anyway.

Meanwhile, we can reflect with the Apostle Paul on our having peace with God through Christ and we, too, can rejoice as Paul did, knowing that, even *through suffering* comes *endurance, character and hope*. (Romans 5:3-5)

There *is*, of course, a role for *political action* in the interest of justice. But such action must have the *power* to achieve its *purpose*. And political action is worse than useless if it does one's cause more harm than help—as in the raging of a Fred Phelps or a Perez Hilton. So it makes sense to get rid of our own crap before we try to get rid of the crap of which we complain. That's being wise as a snake and harmless as a dove instead of being dumb as a dove and harmless as a snake.

Malcolm X finally realized that his militancy did not achieve his purpose and actually distracted from it. But he rationalized that the reckless rhetoric that so enraged his opponents enhanced Dr. King's reception with the opposition.

Observing the enthusiastic rage in LGBT protests, Barney Frank warns: “When you’re engaged in a political fight, if you’re doing something that really, really, really makes you feel good, then it’s probably not the best tactic.” He’s amazed that some gay activists “have the notion that Martin Luther King and the rest of the gang just let it all hang out, that the civil rights movement was just a series of spontaneous outbursts. But,” he points out, “it was in fact a series of strategic decisions.” He adds: “I care deeply about [marriage equality], but the more deeply I care, the more sensible I have to be in achieving it.”

I’ve said, *yes*, we can identify, challenge and change what we *see* makes no sense and we’ll thereby get ourselves out of self-defeating *symptomatic*, *secondary* outrage and back into a bit more productive coping.

But, I’ve also said, *no*, we can’t *get ourselves* out of *all* of our outrage. We can’t *get ourselves* out of our *primary* outrage, for we’re *lost* in our *primary* outrage—the *outrage of our assumed self-sovereignty*.

Given how habitually we get ourselves distressed by *distortion*—all our awfulizing, trivializing, personalizing, romanticizing, rationalizing and all the other “I-zings” that start with “I” and end with zingers of outrage at others who zing them back at us—how can we pose as wise?

On our own, we set ourselves up for unintended trouble in *daily* life. Why do we think that, on our own, we’d do any better in *deepest* life?

Postmodernism helpfully highlights a place for *stories*. But, as with all good things, this emphasis can be abused. We can pay *unreasonable* homage to *our* “stories,” as if they’re secure from selective memory and self-serving spin after all our ruminating in *our* version *ad nauseam*.

Too many are in trouble for settling for the suffocating stories we’ve told ourselves for too long. We need to realize that a middle school maturity level is probably not the best vantage point for perspective. We must bring our “child within” up to speed.

Stories *we* concoct in our outrage won’t help us *overcome* our outrage. It’s only *The Story* from *Outside* our outrage that can resolve *our* stories of outrage and the outrage itself. And that’s *The Story* we don’t come up with on our own. It’s *The Story* we resist. Religionists, philosophers and self-help gurus have never come up with *this* *Story* without the gracious *revelation* of God. It’s *The Story* we must *be told*. It’s *The Story* we, then, must *tell*.

On the 19th of June, 1943, Dorothy L. Sayers replied with a long letter to a young man who’d written three weeks before about his take on her BBC play about Christ, *The Man Born to Be King*. Her letter, in her usual-bracing brilliance, is too good not to share at some length.

She corrects his saying that her play's about "intolerance towards a progressive young man." She states: It's "a story about God." She goes on to say: "I think the thing that contributed perhaps most of all to the chaos and misery of your generation, and indeed of my own, was that they had forgotten that it was a story about God. They could not understand why earthly hopes should turn out to be illusory, human ideals issue (in practice) in hideous travesties of themselves, 'progress' turn round and go backwards, the old brutality burst up under the crust of civilisation, and chaos appear to have come again. It was not only that they suffered—they were dumbfounded, and the bottom of their universe had fallen out. The only people who were not, and could not be, astonished were those who remembered what the story of Christ was about. It is the story of how man killed and murdered God; and it is the epitome of all history. Christians know quite well that innocence goes to the cross, for what was crucified was innocence itself. They know that there is no trust to be placed in 'human progress' as such, not in any child of man; [Psalm 146:3] and that increased scientific knowledge can only widen the scope and power both of good and evil, not alter their essential antagonism. ... There is no 'security' in this world, nor ever can be—no final security. The story of Jesus is not a story of intolerance towards a progressive young man which a little education and kindness of heart would have amended—it is God who is on the cross."

"The thing that the Christian Church forgot to teach ... or was howled down ... if she *did* teach it, was that every human soul carries within it that seed of corruption and that will to death which is technically called 'original sin', and that this corruption is manifest, not simply in our vices, but also in our virtues and our ideals." But, she observes, "people imagined ... that man had only to discover some formula or other and carry it out to reach the Golden Age. When the formula did not work, they thought there must be sabotage somewhere, and savagely turned to smash whatever suitable fetish seemed to present itself—politicians, capitalists, Jews, Bolsheviks, churches, Colonel Blimp [a cartoon character]—anybody who could be made into a whipping boy. But the trouble is in man himself, as they would have known if they had not discarded the old theology in favour of the new humanism."

So she objects to the young man's speaking of a so-called "postwar world." "My dear boy ... unless [we begin] by understanding what sort of creature man is, and what sort of story we are living through, [we] have no hope of accomplishing anything. As if [the world] demands that Christianity should show it a short-cut to an easy Utopia. It is asking the impossible. It is true that Christianity today is not in a healthy state—its prophets, too many of them, prophesied falsely and the people loved to have it so. They wanted a nice Father-Christmas sort of God, who would let the children 'express themselves,' and do as they liked—and when that was duly preached to them they spat it out for pap, which it was. They would not look at the terrible Lord of Glory nailed on the gibbet of history. They thought man was all right—man was the master of things—till they suddenly met man face to face ... at Dunkirk, or in the concentration camps, or in the squalor of betrayal and avarice and cruelty and filth and dishonesty. Then they cried aloud to the Father-Christmas-God who was the only God they had ever heard of. But God was not in the nursery, handing out presents to good boys—He was on the cross beside them."

Theologian Lesslie Newbigin, born 100 years ago this year, wrote this in his book, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*: “Authentic Christian thought and action begin not by attending to the aspirations of the people, not by answering the questions they are asking in their terms, not by offering solutions to the problems as the world sees them. It must begin and continue by attending to what God has done in the story of Israel and supremely in the story of Jesus Christ. It must continue by indwelling that story so that it is our story, the way we understand the real story. And then, and this is the vital point, to attend with open hearts and minds to the real needs of people in the way that Jesus attended to them, knowing that the real need is that which can only be satisfied by everything that comes from the mouth of God (Matt 4:4).”

These countercultural critiques are rooted in God’s really Good News for the *real* good of this lost world. But, as usual, this lost world’s system—including so much that passes for “spirituality”—is dead set against God’s Good News. It prefers the pap of self-righteous blame games, the dogma that there’s no absolute truth but the absolute truth that there’s no absolute truth, and making nice at interfaith rallies round what’s *really* the focus *there*—for example, gay or anti-gay politics of outrage.

Kenneth Woodward, for 38 years *Newsweek*’s religion editor, notes this of such interfaith “spirituality”: It “comes easiest to the religiously indifferent and to the condescending.” Writing in *The New York Times*, he observes: “The problem with interfaith encounters is that they rarely get beyond the show-and-tell to grapple with rival truth claims.” He points out that even “compassion, to cite one common interfaith topic, has a very different meaning for Buddhists than it does for Christians”—or, it can be added, for Muslims, pagans or “Queer Spirit.”

Says Philip Yancey: the cross of Christ “should give us pause when we are tempted to look to politics or science to solve the deepest problems of humanity.”

Says Hans Kung: “The Christian message begins at the point which no state constitution, no economic, social, or cultural system can really teach; the point at which humanity experiences a change of heart. This is what politicians, economists, and sociologists desire but do not achieve, what Karl Marx demanded in vain: ‘a new human being’.” Or, as Jesus put it, but not in vain: a person must be “born again”, “from above”? (John 3:3)

If we can’t learn from serious Christians, maybe we can learn from a serious *atheist*. In 1948, French Dominicans asked Albert Camus to address: “What Do Unbelievers Expect of Christians?” His response was that Christians should take their Christian faith more seriously than many do. This philosopher who spent his life fighting nihilism and totalitarianism, said that Christians should “speak out, loud and clear ... in such a way that never a doubt, never the slightest doubt, could rise in the heart of the simplest man” as to their *Christian* witness.

Well, the Wurmbrands spoke out loud and clear. There was never a doubt among their Communist torturers that *they* were *Christ’s* witnesses. Richard, born in Bucharest 100 years ago this year, and his wife, Sabina, were Jewish converts to Christ. For sharing the Gospel, they were

locked up in the filthy dungeons of Communist Romania. Richard was imprisoned and tortured for 14 years and Sabina was imprisoned and tortured for much of that time. They'd been ripped away from their little boy, thrown into solitary confinement, forced labor, strung upside down and beaten, starved, stripped outside in the dead of winter, and tormented day and night with screeching anti-Christian and pro-Communist propaganda.

Through it all, they did not freeze-frame their ordeal. They did not personalize with an outraged, "Why me?" They did not awfulize an awful situation or insist that outrages against them be turned against their torturers. Rather, they were thankful for the opportunities—even in such outrageous circumstances—to witness for Christ to their torturers and other prisoners. They found that the torture was *mixed* with trust in the *unmixed* faithfulness of their Father. They prayed, even when so exhausted from mind-bending brainwashing and other blows that they couldn't remember all the lines of the Lord's Prayer. A few of the words welled up and they'd offer these to God. In solitary, Richard would pace back and forth, preaching to himself and to God as his entire congregation.

All the while, Richard and Sabina showed kindness to the tormenters. They prayed for them while being abused, tenderly speaking of Jesus and his love. In some cases, their *torturers* couldn't stand to *torture* them any longer. These torturers couldn't explain away the Christian witness. They turned to Christ. Then *they* became prisoners for Christ.

In 1966, the Wurmbrands were ransomed with money from Christians in the West and they founded Voice of the Martyrs, a ministry to support the persecuted church around the world.

As Richard spoke to Free World congregations, he'd often tell of a fellow prisoner who'd been beaten and thrown into the cell with him and other prisoners for Christ. When this man came to consciousness, Richard asked him if he would pray these words: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do." The abused prisoner said he could *not* pray that. He explained that Jesus was innocent but that he, himself, was a sinner. So, he said, *he'd* pray: "Father, forgive *me*, and them, too, because we *both* don't know what we do."

So far as I'm aware, none of *us* here has been tortured for Christ in anything like the horrors of the persecution suffered by our brother Richard and our sister Sabina and their fellow prisoners for Christ back then and as others still suffer these days. But suffering whatever *we* suffer for Christ, *do* we witness like they did and like these others do?

Reading the Wurmbrands' testimonies and seeing their smiling faces in videos of their talks in churches around the world, we see clear evidence of what they called the *joy* of suffering for Christ. Might we not be a bit curious about what we're missing of *true joy*? Richard said that there were times when—even in the midst of the most brutal torture—he could so *feel* the close presence of *Christ* that he hardly felt the *pain*. So he'd smile at his torturers and speak tenderly of Christ.

When we indulge in outrage and blame games, we need to recall the persecuted church and the sufferings of the Lord for whom they suffer.

But don't mistake this for a guilt trip. It's a call to grow into humble gratitude for the outrageous grace of God. It's an invitation to *exchange* outrages—*our* self-serving outrage for the outrageously costly love of Christ. In the Cosmic Outrage of Christ's cross, *our* outrage can die.

Overcoming outrage means facing what's *behind* it and then facing what's behind *that*. Finally, it means facing the most grievous Outrage of all—the *monstrous Martyrdom of God*—bullied, stripped naked, and crucified in Christ *by* us all. His life and death were his sacrifices *for* us all.

So, to save *us*, who deal so outrageously with God and each other, he did not save himself. Rather, God—in the person of Christ—put *himself* into our murderous hands and took into *himself*, all our sin, all our death. Said Paul: “*God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, not counting peoples' sins against them.*” (II Corinthians 5:19)

Does the Religious *Right* get that? Does the Religious *Left* get that? Do *we* get that?

God took into *himself* all *our* outrage and whatever we've ever had *just* cause to be outraged about. *God* saves us from *ourselves*, adopts us as *family*, and turns blame games into *love* for even enemies! *His absurd Self-Sacrifice is The Overcoming Outrage*—once and for all and forever overcoming all outrage against each other and all outrage against him.

* * *

Well, I've said that it's good to be able to use our God-given brains to figure out what we're telling ourselves that sets us up for unwanted feelings such as frustration, fear, hurt and irritation that we then vent in anger and outrage at each other. And it's good to be able to find and challenge the irrationalities in what we're telling ourselves so that we can change our minds, feel better and thus overcome our outrage at one another.

But the very best is to be able to hear what God is telling us, that we might be freed from our deepest outrage—our outrage against God, himself. The Good News is that God was in Christ in his life unto death in The Overcoming Outrage of the cross—overcoming once and for all and forever all our deepest outrage against God, all the deepest outrage that underlies all outrage against each other.

So, Christ Jesus calls *us* now, as he called his first disciples, to a *new* commandment: “Love one another *as I've loved you!*” (John 13:34) It's *because* we're *safe in his love* that we can afford to *forget our safety* and *spend our new selves* for him and each other.